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Conversation analysis and the study of language and politics

Steven E. Clayman and Laura Loeb

Introduction

Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) has long served as an approach to the study of language and politics. Although CA research initially focused on generic interactional practices largely within the domain of ordinary conversation, a shift toward task-oriented forms of institutional talk emerged by the 1980s, with political speeches and broadcast news interviews figuring prominently in this line of work. Other politically relevant forms of talk soon became the focus of study, including radio call-in shows, presidential news conferences, campaign debates, and participatory democracy meetings. As should be apparent from this list, CA studies have illuminated the production of talk about political matters as well as talk that is central to the doing of politics itself. Scholarly attention to these areas has not been evenly distributed, but there are now few politically relevant interactional forms that have not been subject to scrutiny from a conversation analytic perspective. And while CA studies have not always explicitly addressed the political dimensions of such talk, nor even language per se as opposed to multimodal forms of vocal and non-vocal behaviour, many such studies nonetheless yield insight into the nexus of language, interaction and politics.

CA exploits the concreteness and specificity of language practices to illuminate political meanings, tasks, norms, relationships and institutions. In this respect, it has much in common with other approaches to language and politics. What is most distinctive about the CA approach is a persistent empirical focus on language practices in the context of direct interactional encounters between some combination of political figures, media professionals and ordinary people. As a corollary of this interactional focus, language practices are understood to be: (1) housed within turns at talk, (2) produced in the service of specifiable actions, and (3) both responsive to prior actions and consequential for the actions that follow.

The focus on interactional materials necessarily excludes written contexts of political language use, but it is otherwise wide-ranging and has a variety of substantive and methodological affordances. The sequencing of interaction is a primary locus for the production of action, for displays of understanding of action, and for the exercise of agency and social influence (Heritage 1984a, Schegloff 2007). These dimensions of action,
understanding, and influence are thoroughly intertwined in the move-by-move unfolding of interaction, as each contribution simultaneously displays understanding of what came before, acts on that understanding and shapes what happens next. Accordingly, by examining how language is put to use within interaction, it is possible to gain a lively sense of the utility of specific practices, how they operate on prior actions produced by other interactional participants and are consequential for what happens next. At the same time, it is also possible to gain a sense of the social meaning of such practices for the interactants themselves, with the speaker’s understanding evident in the specifics of how they deploy each practice, and the recipient’s understanding evident in how they respond. Examining the sequencing of language practices in interaction thus provides a means of justifying and validating analytic claims.

Moreover, this research has yielded interlocking and cumulative findings about the inner workings and norms of conduct in a wide range of interactional arenas, which together comprise an important part of the contemporary mediated public sphere.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the conversation analytic approach to language and politics. We begin with a discussion of some of the methodological principles characteristic of this approach, and we then review some exemplary research studies relevant to language and politics. It bears emphasis that the discussion of both methods and findings are far from exhaustive, and readers interested in delving deeper into the approach are urged to consult other relevant literature.¹

**CA methodology**

**Getting started**

Conversation analysis is concerned with the detailed study of interaction as it naturally occurs. Experimental manipulations and role-playing are avoided on the grounds that such circumstances almost always impose motivations or simplifying constraints on the participants, resulting in interactional conduct that bears on uncertain relationship to ordinary talk. Within the parameters of naturally occurring interaction, primacy is placed on data that have been audio- or video-recorded to enable repeated scrutiny, and systematically transcribed so as to capture the details of what was actually said and done (for transcription conventions in general as well as those utilised when analysing examples below, see Hepburn & Bolden 2012).

Interactional activities can be investigated at varying levels of granularity. At a broad level are overarching *tasks* and *norms*, such as the politician’s impetus to appeal to both partisan and centrist voters, and the journalist’s obligation to be non-partisan and objective. Such tasks and norms typically serve as a vernacularly familiar starting point for analysis, which then focuses on the less-familiar practices through which they are enacted. In some settings, there may also be specialised *turn-taking systems* that specify how opportunities to speak are distributed between the participants, imposing constraints on participation and the production of action. Specialised turn-taking systems tend to be operative in settings that are ‘formal’ (e.g. news interviews, campaign debates) or involve multiple participants (e.g. news conferences, participatory democracy and town meetings, political speeches).

At a finer level of granularity are discrete *sequences of action*, which may be analysed for their relatively generic sequential properties (e.g. as paired actions), or for type-specific characteristics (e.g. as question–answer sequences, disagreement sequences, sequences of political rhetoric and audience applause, etc.). Next come the *actions* that comprise
sequences and are often accomplished through a single turn at talk, such as questioning, praising or criticising, responding to these various actions, and so on. Finally, there are *practices mobilised within turns*, such as lexical choices, prosodic features and non-vocal behaviours, which may be relevant to the action in progress, or more overarching tasks and norms.

As should be apparent from the preceding list, virtually everything that happens in interaction is fair game for analysis. Contrary to the assumption that much interactional conduct can be dismissed as random noise, conversation analysts proceed from the premise that all elements of interaction are potentially orderly and meaningful for the participants (Sacks 1984). This attitude opens up a wealth of possibilities for analysis. Specific lines of inquiry may be motivated by the goal of building on previous research findings, exploring new forms of interactional data, or explicating new practices.

Since the latter type of inquiry – research stimulated by previously unnoticed and unexamined interactional practices – is a hallmark of CA, but relatively marginal to social science more generally, we dwell on this at greater length. Purely unmotivated observation is, of course, an unattainable ideal, as analysts necessarily approach data with a conceptual foundation grounded in previous research, which affects what they are inclined to observe. Nevertheless, it is possible to notice and be intrigued by practices that are not directly related to a pre-existing research agenda. Such ‘noticings’ can prompt the analyst to explicate what, if anything, the practice might be ‘doing’ or accomplishing. This typically involves examining where and how it contributes to the stream of interaction, and with what consequence.

To illustrate, Heritage (2002) noticed that journalists would sometimes depart from the more commonplace grammatical format for polar questions by incorporating a negative into the copula (e.g. *Isn’t it…*, *Aren’t you…*, etc.). Since this practice, termed a negative interrogative, is an optional grammatical choice in the design of polar questions, what is the import of this choice? A clue may be gleaned from the responses that negative interrogatives tend to attract, in which the recipient claims to ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ with the proposition framed by the negative interrogative. For instance, President Bill Clinton responds to a negative interrogative about campaign funding irregularities in just this way (‘I disagree with that…’).

1 IR: W’ll Mister President in your zea:l (.) for funds during
2 → the last campaign .hh didn’t you put the Vice President (.)
3 an’ Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) administration
4 top side .hh in a very vulnerable position, hh
5 (0.5)
6 BC: → I disagree with that .hh u– How are we vulnerable because …

(1, Clinton News Conference, 7 March 1997)

The negative interrogative recurrently receives this type of response in news interviews and news conferences, and it is the only grammatical form to do so (Heritage 2002). The pattern suggests that the form is relatively assertive, with questions formatted in this way treated as opinionated and as straddling the boundary between seeking and expressing information. Correspondingly, the frequency with which negative interrogatives are used in the design of yes/no questions later served as an index of the propensity for journalists to depart from strict neutrality and express a point of view under the guise of ‘asking questions’ (Clayman & Heritage 2002a; Clayman et al. 2006; Heritage & Clayman 2013).


**Grounding analytic claims**

In the broad tradition of interpretive social science, CA seeks analyses that are ‘emic’ and hence grounded in the understandings and orientations of the participants themselves. Within interaction, the understandings that matter most are those that participants display, act on, and thus render consequential for the interaction’s subsequent development (Schegloff & Sacks 1973).

A central resource for tapping into such understandings, already glimpsed in excerpt 1 above, is embodied in how recipients respond to the practice in question. Since contributions to interaction are, to some extent, directed to or conditioned by the previous contribution, each contribution will normally display that speaker’s understanding of what was just said and done by the prior speaker (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). Interactants themselves rely on such retrospective displays of understanding to ascertain whether and how they were understood, and this ‘architecture for intersubjectivity’ (Heritage 1984b) is also a resource for grounding and validating analytic claims.

For instance, Clayman (1992a) advanced the claim that when journalist-interviewers shift footings – by attributing their remarks to a third party either overtly (i.e. *Critics say that*…), or by implication (i.e. *It is said that*…) – this serves to maintain a formally neutral or ‘neutralistic’ posture. The most straightforward evidence for this claim is that recipients, in responding to attributed talk, often treat such talk as belonging to the same third party. For instance, in a discussion of nuclear waste, the interviewer expresses the view that waste disposal is a readily soluble problem (lines 5–11), directly contradicting the pessimistic view expressed just previously by a critic of the nuclear industry (lines 1–4). As he introduces this oppositional viewpoint, he makes a special point of indicating that it belongs to another interviewee from earlier in the programme (‘Doctor Yalow said… her own opinions… she seems to feel…’), and he also refrains from endorsing, rejecting, or otherwise commenting on that view.2

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1  JS:  And if you look et– simply the record in the
2  low level waste field over the last fifteen to
3  twenty years… the record is not very good (0.3)
4  an’ it doesn’t give one a cause for optimism.=
5  IR:  → =You heard what Doctor Yalow said earlier in
6  this broadcast she’ll have an opportunity to
7  → express her own opinions again, but she seems to
8  feel that it is an EMinently soluble problem,
9  and that ultimately that radioactive material
10  can be reduced, to manageable quantities, ‘n’ put
11  in the bottom of a salt mine.
12  JS:  → The p– the point that she was making earlier
13  about () reprocessing of: the fuel rods goes
14  right to the heart () of the way a lotta
15  people look at this particular issue…

(2, US ABC Nightline, 6 June, 1985, Nuclear Waste)

This neutralistic posture may, of course, be a façade, but it is subsequently validated and reinforced by the response (‘The point she was making earlier’ in line 12).

Just as responses yield insight into recipient’s understanding of the practice in question, the specifics of the practice’s deployment are often revealing of the speaker’s
own grasp of the practice. With regard to the footing-shift practice, its neutralistic import is further apparent in the selectivity with which this practice is used by interviewers. Consider this question to Senator Bob Dole, the Reagan-era majority leader for the Republican Party, which begins with an extended preface comprised of three declarative assertions.

The first assertion (beginning at arrow 1) – that Reagan was elected ‘thirteen months ago’ in ‘an enormous landslide’ – reports a concrete historical fact and a matter of public record, and this fact is asserted straightforwardly. In contrast, the subsequent claim that Reagan’s programmes are ‘in trouble’ (beginning at arrow 2) and the suggestion that Dole is to blame for this (beginning at arrow 3) are, by comparison, matters of judgement and interpretation. Correspondingly, the interviewer distances himself from these latter assertions, first by means of the passive voice with agent deletion (‘it is said’), and second by attribution to ‘some people at the White House’.

Footing shifts are also deployed selectively over the course of a single sentence, such that a contentious word or phrase is singled out for attribution. In the next example, from an interview with an anti-apartheid activist in South Africa, the IR begins (lines 1–2) by attributing an upcoming viewpoint in its entirety to a third party (‘the Ambassador’), and this footing is later renewed just prior to a specific term (‘collaborator’, arrowed) which is re-attributed to that party.

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The term *collaborator* has strong negative and accusatory overtones here, in effect characterising moderate black activists as agents of the apartheid regime. It is precisely this contentious term that the IR disavows, in addition to the overall viewpoint of which it is a part. Here again, the resulting neutralistic stance is subsequently validated by the IE (‘The ambassador has it wrong’ in line 8).

**Working through collections**

The objective of CA is to elucidate socially shared methods used to build interaction. Although the close study of single specimens or cases is fundamental to this process, a full analysis transcends any particular case and sheds light on practices that operate across a range of participants and social contexts. As Sacks has observed:

> Thus it is not any particular conversation, as an object, that we are primarily interested in. Our aim is to get into a position to transform… our view of ‘what happened,’ from a matter of a particular interaction done by particular people, to a matter of interactions as products of a machinery. We are trying to find the machinery. In order to do so we have to get access to its products.

(Sacks 1984, pp. 26–27)

This requires working case by case through collections of candidate instances of a given practice. This process enriches an analysis initially arrived at through a single case, in the first instance confirming (or disconfirming) that the practice has a recurrent and consequential import. It also illuminates such matters as the practice’s various forms, the boundaries that separate it from related practices, and its scope and normativity.

When building collections of a given practice, it is advisable to cast a wide net. This means including what appear to be clear cases of the practice in question, as well as cases in which the practice is present in an atypical or partial form, and also what appear to be negative or ‘deviant’ cases. Analyzing such cases, rather than dismissing them as random noise, almost always yields a richer and more encompassing analysis.

Once a collection is assembled, analysis proceeds on a case-by-case basis, with the aim of developing a comprehensive account that encompasses all relevant instances in the collection. The process is roughly analogous to analytic induction (Katz & Emerson 1983), although in CA the objective is not causal explanation, but an analysis that will encompass a practice’s varying occurrences across a range of interactional contexts and exigencies.

Central to this process is the analysis of problematic or deviant cases. Some such cases are shown, upon analysis, to result from interactants’ orientation to the same considerations that produce the ‘regular’ cases; they are ‘exceptions that prove the rule’. In other instances, deviant cases can prompt the researcher to replace the initial analysis with a more general formulation that encompasses both the regular cases and the anomalous departure. Finally, some deviant cases may, upon analysis, turn out to fall beyond the parameters of the phenomenon being investigated. Such cases are not genuinely ‘deviant’ at all, and they serve to clarify the boundaries of the phenomenon in question.
Quantitative extensions

CA has, in recent years, begun to supplement case-by-case analysis with formally quantitative methods. This development brings various trade-offs. With the aggregation of cases required of such methods, analysis is necessarily removed from the specifics of the participants’ orientations in any particular case. Such aggregation is, however, integrated with and built upon a foundation provided by prior case-by-case research, with coding systems derived explicitly from previous ‘emic’ or participant-centred investigations. Moreover, the quantitative extension of CA has enabled researchers to work with larger datasets and investigate distributional and causal associations between interactional practices, more diffuse dimensions of context and outcomes. In the field of language and politics, quantification has been most prominent in studies of the journalistic questioning of public figures, illuminating such matters as long-term historical trends in vigorous or adversarial questioning (Clayman et al. 2010; Clayman et al. 2006), the impact of socio-economic conditions on adversarialism (Clayman et al. 2007), partisan bias (Ekström et al. 2013; Gnisci et al. 2013; Huls & Varwijk 2011), and the comparison of journalistic versus ‘infotainment’ interviews (Loeb 2015).

Exemplary CA studies

Conversation analysis has been applied to a range of empirical domains relevant to the study of politics. Although language and politics shape one another out of the public eye (Clayman & Reisner 1998; Ekström & Kroon Lundell 2011), here, we focus on public interactions: participatory democracy meetings, political speeches and various forms of broadcast talk, including radio phone-in programmes, journalistic and ‘infotainment’ interviews, and news conferences. These studies are all conversation analytic in character, although some include multimodal and quantitative elaborations of CA work. Taken together, these studies illustrate the capacity of the CA approach to illuminate diverse public interactional environments and the complex relations between language and politics.

Participatory democracy meetings

One context for the application of CA involves direct public input into governmental processes, namely participatory democracy meetings (Mondada 2011; Mondada 2013). At these meetings, examined in Lyons, France, community members come together to discuss and debate the prospect of a public park in the area, and what form that new park should take. As these meetings involve large numbers of community residents, one area of interest is how participation is managed through the regulation of turn taking (Mondada 2013). The research traces how participants gain access to the floor and are ratified to speak, noting that in this large group setting, taking a turn at talk requires multimodal resources beyond those needed in smaller groups (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). Speakers are ratified by the meeting chairperson in a process that requires close attention, not only to the verbal cues of the turn-taking system, but also to embodied cues. These embodied signals allow the chairperson to co-ordinate the next speaker, or even a series of next speakers (Mondada 2013). Mondada notes that this turn-taking system, like all such systems, shapes the capacity of the assembled participants to exert agency within the proceedings and thereby influence its political outcomes.
Radio phone-in shows

Another domain of public participation is the radio phone-in programme. These types of programmes have been researched by a number of scholars (Hutchby 2006; Scannell 1996; Thornborrow 2001a; Thornborrow 2001b). Thornborrow has examined various phone-in radio interviews from Britain in 1987, prior to a general election. Using CA, she highlights how the institutional structure of the radio phone-in programme shapes the actions available to the citizen callers, as well as the politicians.

On these programmes, callers are pre-screened, so that only those with questions approved by the show’s production team are granted air time to ask questions. The host takes on the role of first speaker, introducing the caller, which sparks a round of greetings between host, caller and political guest (Thornborrow 2001a). Only then is the caller able to introduce their question. For the caller, this is their main opportunity to engage the politician directly.

Even when granted the turn space in which to query the politician, callers often work to justify their question as in the excerpt below.

Here the host indicates what the topic will be (at line 2), but the guest still does work to ground their question in their experience and identity (lines 10–12). In doing this, the guest draws on resources outside the immediate interview context to justify their role as questioner (Thornborrow 2001b). These practices shape how questions are asked and suggests that only some questions might be viewed as justifiable in this context.

Once the guest’s question is asked, a host may, or may not, ask a follow-up question on the topic, or ask the caller to do so, but the caller cannot direct the path they take (Thornborrow 2001a). Finally, the host decides when to move to close the call, with the caller not participating in this sequence in most interviews (Thornborrow 2001a). Thornborrow’s research shows the power of interactional structures to shape political moments. Here, although the phone-in is a place where members of the voting public can interact with the major political figures of the day, their participation is substantially constrained by the interactional structure of the phone-in programme.

Hutchby’s research focuses on radio programmes where callers discuss issues of civic importance with the host. Although these interviews differ from those studied by Thornborrow in terms of participants, some of the practices used by both guests and hosts are similar. One such practice is callers using their personal experience to justify the stances they are taking, in a process he calls ‘witnessing’ (Hutchby 2006). Like Thornborrow, Hutchby is interested in the power dynamics between callers and hosts on radio phone-in
programmes. He uses CA to explore the common perception that hosts have significantly more authority and power in these situations, allowing them to control the call. His work shows how the structure of the call allows hosts a measure of power in determining the direction the call will take. In these interactions, callers are expected to state their opinion first, which places the host in the responsive or second position. From this second position, hosts are more able to critique or problematise the caller’s turn, potentially undermining their observations (Hutchby 2006).

In the following example, a caller has made a point about the difficulty of securing childcare (lines 1–6). The host responds with an interrogative that calls into question the relevance of the caller’s point (line 7), and obliges the caller to defend what they have said (lines 8–9).

1 Caller: When you look at e:r the childcare facilities in this country, .hh we’re very very low, (.) i-on the league table in Europe of (.) you know if you try to get a child into a nursery it’s very difficult in this country. .hh An’ in fa:ct it’s getting wor::se.
2 Host: What’s that got to do with it.
3 Caller: .phh Well I think whu– what’s ‘at’s gotta d– do with it.
4 Host: What’s that got to do with it.
6 with it is . . . ((Continues))

(6, H:21.11.88:11:1; Hutchby 2006, p. 92)

This is just one example of how a host can use the responsive or second position to challenge a caller’s perspective. Hosts can also summarise the gist of a caller’s remarks, allowing them to subtly shade what the caller has said (Hutchby 2006). Additionally, hosts can use this second-position slot to undermine the use of personal experience, problematising a caller’s use of witnessing (Hutchby 2006). However, Hutchby also notes that while the typical structure of a radio phone-in call favours the host, the caller can take steps to turn the tables. This demonstrates that power relations are not exogenous to interaction, but are enacted through the practices of talk and are in the same way transformable.

Political speeches

Political speeches constitute yet another domain of direct public involvement in the discourse of politics, although here, public participation typically takes the form of simultaneous collective behaviour, responses such as applause, booing, and laughter (Atkinson 1984; Clayman 1993; Heritage & Greatbatch 1986). Most research in this area has focused on the organisation of applause and how it may be ‘invited’ by political speakers. This pioneering research has been undertaken in Britain and the US, democratic societies where applause plays a key role in shaping perceptions of the popularity of both politicians and their views and policies.

That applause behaviour is socially organised is apparent in the fact that bursts of applause typically begin within 0.2 seconds following the completion of the message to which they are responsive and rise to maximum amplitude in less than 1 second (Atkinson 1984). The timing and placement of applause indicates that many audience members decide to clap independently of one another, while also suggesting that certain points within a political speech not only provoke applause, but also provide for its co-ordinated onset. Researchers
have found that specific rhetorical formats stand out from the background of a speech and provide clearly projectable completion points, and are thus associated with the majority of applause responses (Atkinson 1984; Heritage & Greatbatch 1986). With these devices, the orator and the audience are able to work together to create a prompt and favourable response.

One of the most common and effective rhetorical devices a speech-maker can use to project an impending applause point is a contrast (Heritage & Greatbatch 1986). In a contrast, a political point is delivered in two parts, the second of which is designed to contrast with the first. Contrasts in speeches often use closely parallel language, which allows the audience to predict its point of completion (Atkinson 1984). In the following excerpt from a 1992 Democratic Party convention speech, the speaker uses a contrast (arrowed) to attack a political opponent (independent presidential candidate, Ross Perot).

1 Pol: He says he’s an outsider who will shake up the
2 system in Washington. (0.4) But as far back as 1974
3 he was lobbying Congress for tax breaks, (0.4) He tried
4 to turn fifty five thousand dollars in contributions
5 into a special () fifteen million dollar tax
6 loophole that was tailor made. (.) for him.
7 (1.8) ((light cheering))
8 Sounds to me like (1.0)
9 A→ instead o’shakin’ the system (0.2) up:
10 (0.9)
11 B→ Mister Perot’s been shakin’ it down.
12 Aud: xxxXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX...

(7, Georgia Governor Zell Miller, 1992 Democratic Convention; Heritage & Clayman 2010, pp. 267–268)

In lines 1–8, the speaker presents evidence of hypocrisy in Perot’s actions. This receives some light cheering (line 7), but the audience withholds clapping as he had not yet reached a significant applause point. He then launches a contrast, asserting that Perot is not ‘shaking the system up’ (i.e., instituting government reforms, lines 8–9), but rather ‘shaking it down’ (i.e., engineering self-interested tax breaks, line 11). This formatted contrast both emphasises the substantive message while also providing a clearly projectable completion point, and applause follows promptly thereafter (line 12).

Researchers have outlined a number of effective rhetorical formats beyond contrasts, such as three-part lists, puzzle-solutions, and headline-punchlines (Atkinson 1984). These various formats can also be combined, generating complex and highly effective applause points. Furthermore, quantitative research by Heritage and Greatbatch (1986) demonstrates that these formats have a statistically significant impact on the occurrence of applause. Messages formatted in these ways were two-to-eight times more likely to receive applause than messages that were not rhetorically formatted (Heritage & Greatbatch 1986). A prerequisite for these devices to work is for the audience to be in agreement with the speaker, but the rhetorical format makes it easier for audience members to collectively express their agreement in the form of applause.

These moments of applause indicate affiliation between speaker and audience, but other research has examined the organisation of responses that disaffiliate from the speech and its speaker (Clayman 1993; Clayman 1992b). Clayman finds that unlike applause, booing tends to be delayed and builds more gradually as audience members successively join in the
response. Moreover, because booing tends to be delayed, other response behaviours tend to serve as the proximate ‘trigger’ for the response (e.g. a murmur or ‘buzz’ of disapproval, or clapping by other audience members). Booing is used by audiences to disaffiliate from either the speaker per se, or from the speaker in conjunction with other audience members who are applauding (Clayman 1993). These two forms of response show that while speeches are not always thought to be particularly interactive, audiences can express their reactions and make their approval or disapproval heard.

Journalistic and ‘infotainment’ interviews

Broadcast news interviews are an arena of direct encounters between political figures and media professionals, and as such, have been the site of much scholarly interest. Within conversation analysis, a good deal of work has been done on the distinctive turn-taking system that characterises news interview talk and guides participation, as well as the professional norms that inform practices of question design (Clayman 1988; Clayman 1991; Clayman & Heritage 2002b; Greatbatch 1988). Clayman and Heritage have analysed two norms of news interview questioning. The norm of neutralism, which is rooted in the broader ideal of journalistic objectivity, restricts interviewers to the activity of questioning and prohibits declarative assertions, except as prefaces to a question, or as attributed to a third party (Clayman & Heritage 2002b). The norm of adversarialism, rooted in the ideals of independence, balance and the watchdog role, favours questions that critically scrutinise politicians’ positions and remarks. While these two norms are not a universal feature of journalistic questioning (Montgomery 2007, 2011), they are broadly relevant in news interviews with politicians and shape many aspects of question design (Clayman 1992a; Clayman 1988; Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Romaniuk 2013). For instance, the footing shifts discussed earlier in this chapter (excerpts 2, 3, 4 on pp. 279–281) enable the journalist to adversarially challenge the politician, while maintaining a neutralistic posture.

One variant of news interview research concerns interviews with campaigning politicians. This research has shown that campaign interviews entail much the same norms and practices as other news interviews, but they are mobilised in the service of specialised tasks relevant to the questioning of political candidates (Clayman & Romaniuk 2011). One type of question designed for political candidates is the ‘pop quiz question’ (Roth 2005), which tests the candidate’s knowledge of current affairs. With this type of question, the newsworthiness of the answer lies not in its informational content, but in what it reveals about the politician’s ability or inability to answer. By asking pop quiz questions, interviewers suggest that politicians should have the targeted knowledge, while also implying that they might not. The following exchange with presidential candidate George W Bush, which quizzes him on his knowledge of contemporary world leaders, illustrates this practice:

1 Hiller: Can you name the president of Chechnya?
2 Bush: No, can you?
3 Hiller: Can you name the president of Taiwan?
4 Bush: Yeah, Lee.
5 Hiller: Can you name the general who is in charge
6 of Pakistan?
7 Bush: Wait, wait. Is this 50 Questions?

(8, Roth 2005, p. 33)
Notice that Bush is resistant to the line of questioning, which he correctly identifies as unlike typical interview questions. Exchanges like this can be extremely newsworthy, but also controversial (Roth 2005). Accordingly, journalist-interviewers have more subtle ways of testing candidates’ knowledge, as well as performing other tasks relevant to screening candidates for elective office (Clayman & Romaniuk 2011).

Other interview genres relevant to politics and political campaigns have also been investigated. The celebrity talk-show interview (e.g. The Tonight Show, The Late Show, The View), which is generally seen as an exercise in ‘infotainment’, rather than straight journalism, is becoming an increasingly important arena for politicians on the campaign trail (Baum 2005; Baum & Jamison 2006; Farnsworth & Lichter 2007; Jones 2010) and a focus of conversation analytic investigation (Loeb 2014; Loeb 2015). Such interviews are characterised by a distinctive matrix of norms and practices, with the host’s interviewing practices normally embodying qualities of personalisation rather than neutralism, and congeniality rather than adversarialness. However, when politicians appear on such programmes, the resulting interviews become a hybrid of the political and celebrity interview forms, with statistical analysis documenting a blend of interviewing norms and practices (Loeb in press). This results in a unique form of campaign interview, and a distinctive arena in which politicians appear before the public.

**News conferences**

News conferences have also been examined from a CA perspective. Here, the focus has been on formal quantitative analysis of aggressive or adversarial questioning, with initial work focusing on the US context and tracing historical trends in the aggressiveness of questions directed toward the president (Clayman et al. 2010; Clayman et al. 2006; Clayman et al. 2007; Clayman et al. 2012; Heritage & Clayman 2013). Five dimensions of aggressive questioning have been examined: initiative, directness, assertiveness, adversarialness and accountability. All dimensions have exhibited a rising trend in aggressiveness from 1953 to 2000 (Clayman et al. 2006), with directness rising relatively gradually, while other dimensions have been more volatile over time (Clayman et al. 2006). Further research looking at the specific question form of the negative interrogative supported and strengthened this finding (Heritage & Clayman 2013). These findings, in turn, provide ample evidence of growing press independence in the US and an increasingly adversarial relationship between the press and the presidency.

Subsequent research has suggested that this shift was driven in part by a normative shift that took place following the era coinciding with the Nixon administration, which reframed how journalists relate to the president (Clayman et al. 2010). Other research has identified a range of other circumstantial factors associated with more aggressive questioning. At the level of journalistic attributes (Clayman et al. 2012), female journalists were more aggressive than male journalists from 1953–1968, although the gender difference has attenuated since that time. A contrast that has persisted is between journalists who are regulars at press conferences and those who appear less frequently, with the former being significantly more aggressive (Clayman et al. 2012). Beyond the level of the individual journalist, question content is also demonstrably consequential, with domestic policy questions more aggressive than questions dealing with foreign affairs or national security (Clayman et al. 2007). The economic context is also significant, with questions more aggressive when unemployment rates and interest rates are on the rise (Clayman et al. 2007). This research shows how conversation analysis can provide the foundation for formal quantification of language
practices, which, when applied to news conference data can shed light on the dynamic and evolving relationship between press and state.

Conclusion

The research studies reviewed here demonstrate how a focus on language practices within interaction can inform the study of politics from the vantage point of direct encounters between political figures, media personnel and ordinary people.

While a variety of politically relevant interactional forms have been investigated, progress has not been evenly distributed. Among interactions between political figures and media professionals, journalistic interviews and presidential news conferences have until recently overshadowed the study of ‘infotainment’ talk shows – even though the latter are becoming an increasingly important venue for public appearances by elected officials and political candidates. Among interactions between political figures and ordinary people, political speeches involving collective audience behaviour have, until recently, overshadowed contexts in which members of the public participate as individuals in governmental and political processes. By the same token, new research initiatives in the study of celebrity talk shows, direct democracy meetings and other environments of public participation (Thornborrow 2014) have begun to rectify this. Furthermore, the addition of statistical techniques, with coding systems built upon, and validated by, prior qualitative research, has begun to add range and depth to this work, enabling the study of distributional patterns and causal associations between language practices and socio-political contexts. All this work has yielded expanding insight into the diverse interactional arenas in which such language is deployed, and the political processes and institutions to which it contributes.

Notes

1 For more thorough discussions of CA methods, see ten Have (1999), Heritage (1997), and Clayman & Gill (2012). For more comprehensive reviews of politically relevant research studies, see Clayman (2012) and Hutchby (2006).

2 This excerpt, and the next two to follow, are from network television news interview programmes in the US.

References


